Apathy, boredom or misunderstood? Engaging students in the politics of language and the language of politics in a critical literacy course

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Abstract

This chapter reports on two cycles of action research in a *Critical Literacy* course that aimed to increase engagement and confidence with identifying political worldviews in media texts. The contemporary political, economic and social context has produced intensified political polarization leading to increased importance of developing tools to assess the credibility of news stories. At the same time, university students demonstrate a disconnection or 'apathy' when politics is introduced into the course context, with protestations that it is 'boring' and 'not relevant for their lives'. This chapter explores the impact of adopting the enabling pedagogical tools of 'connecting to life worlds', 'setting challenging tasks' and 'scaffolding' to not only increase the engagement with 'politics' and their skills of identifying competing worldviews but also the relevance of politics for the students' lives. Woven throughout the chapter is how the pedagogy of discomfort significantly impacted on the teaching and learning experience for the educator and the students. Teaching 'critical thinking' has the potential to both empower and 'shatter world-views' that have to actively be (re)made again by the educator through offering possibilities and hope.

Introduction

'Politics affects almost everything, so if you don't do politics there's not much you do do' (Walker 2004).

In this chapter I reflect on the practice of developing critical enabling pedagogies and the transformative effect of teaching criticality to marginalized members of our community through an action research project. This chapter provides an account of how I adopted anti-deficit (Comber & Kamler 2004; Hattam & Prosser 2008) strategies in my critical literacy course that contribute to increased confidence and transformation for some of my students (Freire 1993). Teaching critical literacy in a university widening participation enabling program, targeted at people who were historically marginalised, is fundamentally important (Hattam & Stokes 2019). Enabling programs are defined as programs of instruction that incorporate enabling subjects or modules designed to develop academic skills to facilitate the transition of students into higher level award programs (National Association of Enabling Educators in Australia 2019). Over the last decade, the enabling sector has flourished across Australia where practitioners and educators have begun to define

distinctive approaches to teaching students in preparatory programs (Bennett et al., 2016; Stokes 2014).

In the past I have been asked to explain critical literacy's importance when compared to an instructional English course. My course moves beyond explicit language instruction to examine how language is used for political purposes by contemporary politicians and the neo-liberal media that do not represent the interests of our marginalised students (Giroux 2004, p.496). I draw on Shor's argument (2005, p. 168) that 'learning for democracy is our professional responsibility by developing students as critical citizens whose thinking and acting include tools for analysis of their lives and their society'. The tools developed in the course assists the recognition of how 'language use is one social force constructing us' (Shor, 1999, p. 2) and critical literacy can 'teach oppositional discourses so as to remake ourselves and our culture' (Shor, 1999, p. 2). This element of critical literacy is liberatory as students engage in dialogue regarding the social constructions of race, gender, sexuality, social class, age and religion in the texts around them. Students are encouraged to question the 'truth' claims that are being told in these narratives that may be contributing to their own marginalisation in Australian society as a result of the dominant neo-liberal, racist, patriarchal and capitalist belief systems informing the daily mainstream news cycle.

My action research project evolved over three years from the challenge of how to explicitly teach and engage students with the politics of language to how to manage the discomfort experienced by some students and myself in the discussion of politics (Boler 2004). Some students regard discussing politics as dangerous and divisive (Hess & Gatti 2010, p. 19). In spite of this resistance, my account of an action research project demonstrates increased students confidence and skill in identifying how language is used for political purposes to communicate competing progressive/conservative worldviews. My project also shows how students traverse from disinterest or perceived apathy with politics at the beginning of the course to an intense concern with how the media adopts linguistic techniques to manipulate and persuade. To be clear on what definition of 'politics' I adopt in my course, I propose that 'politics' is 'everywhere', not limited to Parliament, politicians, policy planning or legislation, but also discussions of social issues by politicians and people who aren't politicians. In this sense, 'politics is the process by which members of a community discuss and decide about how they are governed' (Mooney 2015, p. 43). Evidently this discussion occurs through specific language choices, and subsequently 'politics' becomes observable in the cultural sphere. As Giroux (2004, p. 499) suggests,

> cultural politics must be reclaimed as the site where dialogue, critique, and public engagement become crucial as an affirmation of a democratically configured space of the social in which the political is actually taken up and lived out through a variety of intimate relations and social formations'.

The focus on 'politics' has historically been a small part of the course that is given greater focus due to broader socio-political currents affecting Australia. The impacts of the Trump era brought new challenges with fake news and contested claims for 'truth', as well as a heightened sense of insecurity manifesting rising ethno-nationalism (Giroux 2017). In Australia the more pressing problem is the increase in concentration of media ownership (Arsenault & Castells 2008; Dwyer

2016) and undermining of publicly owned media groups (such as ABC), which has led to increased political bias and less diversity of political views in the mainstream media (Gallagher 2019). Pedagogies that increase student confidence in understanding the link between language and power creates a more informed citizenry that is able to critically examine the political messaging they are immersed in and is vital to the health of our democracy (Hess & Gatti 2010, p. 22).

The 'post-truth' or 'fake news' phenomena has added another dimension to the importance of critical literacy in 2021 as people are 'getting their facts from information bubbles or from talking to like-minded people' (Janks in Turner & Griffin 2019, p. 320) as objective facts are over-ridden by appeals to emotion. The global shifts to the 'right' side of politics has brought concern within the social sciences and humanities and it is argued by some that there needs to be more explicit teaching of political media bias (Comber 2015). However, this phenomena has been brewing for some time. Luke (2000, p. 448) identified twenty years ago the connection between the neo-liberal approaches and critical literacy and the moral anxiety around moral certainty. Its long past time that we found practical pedagogical interventions that address the issue. What we need is hopeful ideas and try and action them, rather than stopping at just understanding them.

This chapter will set out how my teaching challenges emerged and I conducted action research to respond to this research question: How does utilising elements of enabling pedagogy - specifically connecting to student lifeworlds, scaffolding, setting challenging tasks and transformation- increase students engagement with and understanding of 'politics' and provide the students with greater understanding of the way that language is utilised to promote a world view (such as progressive/conservative) in the media?

I make three key moves in this chapter: Firstly, I outline the emergence of my teaching challenge taken up in this action research project. Second, I detail what I did differently through further refinement of enabling pedagogical (Bennett et al 2016; Stokes 2014) approaches. Third, I elaborate on what I learnt from the project about my teaching and my students. My chapter demonstrates with student artefacts (assignment submissions) a more sophisticated analysis of the stance of the author with the linking of particular views to a progressive/conservative worldview or specific ideology (such as feminism).

The insights given in the student data also show that students experience increased awareness from developing their understanding of political media bias and how language is used to manipulate or persuade us to adopt a specific viewpoint in media texts. While I concur with Shor (1992, p. 196) that most often, 'students do not come to class with a transformative agenda. Few are looking for empowering education', this chapter demonstrates students are often transformed by completing a critical literacy course in an enabling education program.

My teaching challenge: Low confidence and high discomfort with politics of language

Contesting dominant narratives in a university critical literacy course appears to be increasingly important as neo-liberalism – as the dominant political discourse disseminated via the media– is also ever present and insidiously inserting itself throughout the academy (Connell 2011; Olssen

& Peters 2012). While there is an assumption that 'liberal biases saturate scholarship and teaching in universities which in turn lays the bedrock for the left-wing indoctrination of students' (Hess & Gatti 2010, p. 19), others argue that there is 'fading academic support and growing intolerance for pedagogies that attempt to interrogate privilege' (Dutta, Schroll, Engelsen, Prickett, Hajjar & Green 2016). On this point, Janks offers a useful framework that shifts the focus away from privilege and towards the everyday 'struggles' that are presented to us through texts that critical literacy can assist us to challenge and confront to enact change: 'I argued that in a perfect world in which social differences did not determine who gets access to resources and opportunity, we would still need critical literacy to help us read the texts that construct the politics of everyday life' (2014, p. 349).

My teaching challenge emerged in relation to students not demonstrating a confidence in their application of the competing progressive/conservative worldviews in their second assignment for the course, a critical review of a media text. This was observed over a number of years as students responses to the question 'What ideology or worldview underpins the stance in the text' was often haphazard and patchy. The students are given a template with prompt questions that also include: what is the topic, what is the purpose of the text, what is the rhetorical function of the text, who is the intended audience, how are the participants positioned, what is the stance of the author and has it achieved its intended impact. The curriculum and topic structure has been designed so we address one or two elements of the template each week through various activities and text analysis and the students apply these elements to their own text analysis in the assessment.

What I have found startling is that students are adept at labelling something as 'woke' (Kanai & Gill 2021) or show their dismay over 'cancel culture' (Bouvier 2020) - 'why is Mr Potato Head losing his 'Mister' (BBC 2021) - yet struggle to identify a progressive or conservative stance in a news article. Students were producing a strong statement about whether the stance of the author was to 'condemn or commend', but were not connecting it as strongly to a broader worldview or ideology. Students are encouraged to consider this process in their analysis of the 'stance of the text':

Writers have beliefs about an issue
(Ideology/world view)
↓
They express their position or stance
(perspective)
↓
They provide arguments to support their perspective
(arguments)
↓
They provide evidence to support each argument
(evidence)

Based on observations, I began developing a curriculum where 'politics' and ideology was taught more explicitly in my course. While this led to improved student outcomes in term of the understanding and sophistication of the text analysis, it produced another challenge in regard to the 'discomfort' shown by some students that often occurred as 'critical incidents' (Tripp 1994, p. 69) in the teaching space. The resistance to political discussions was communicated quite vehemently at times, with one student approaching me at the end of the first class and asking if she could change courses as she is not interested in discussing any of 'these political' issues; and another challenging me in front of the class about the suggestion to be aware of how our emotions may prevent our ability to think critically about a topic, that I was 'denying people's right to have views that are based on how they felt about something (in this case, the topic of immigration had just been raised); or another student who, after hearing from a number of students who identified as experiencing discrimination based on their sexual or ethnic identities, that he strongly believed in freedom of speech even if it offended the person.

I was shocked in this particular teaching moment that a student would be so brazen to announce his view that could cause hurt for the students who had shared their own experiences of discrimination. Boler (2004) provides a useful explanation for the students discomfort:

> To shatter worldviews – specifically, to suggest that some unfairly benefit from (white, male, or heterosexual) privilege – can be emotionally translated into feeling one has no place of belonging. Are not angry protestations the cries of someone trying to save his - or herself from annihilation? (p. 118)

I acknowledged these 'critical incidents' (Tripp 1994) as 'indicative of underlying trends' that presented a 'dilemma' in which I had two mutually inclusive courses of action. Do I ignore the discomfort of my students or acknowledge it? What is the best course of action in acknowledging it? I chose to increase my focus on the 'affective' elements of teaching, because 'emotions' are critical to the sense-making process' (Blackmore 2009). I assumed the discomfort in exploring 'politics' distracted students from focusing on the learning task and produced an 'ill feeling' in the teaching space that was new and challenging for me. This 'ill feeling' is shared by others (Shor 2007) and captured powerfully by Boler (2004) as she describes the three categories of students she encounters in her sociology course:

> There are those willing to walk down the path of critical thinking with me, who find their world-views shattered, but simultaneously engage in creatively rebuilding a sense of meaning and coherence in the face of ambiguity. Secondly, there are those who angrily and vocally resist my attempts to suggest that the world might possibly be other than they have comfortably experienced it. Third, are those who appear disaffected, already sufficiently numb so that my attempts to ask them to rethink the world encounter only vacant and dull stares…it is often the case that the most intense emotions of suffering are experienced by both myself and the students who loudly resist having their worldviews challenged'. (p.117).

Others suggest that discomfort is important to the learning process and that the 'absence of disruption and ambiguity' undermines the 'opportunity for change or growth' (Faulkner & Crowhurst 2014, p. 397). I am encouraged that students feedback has demonstrated a shift in thinking about 'evidence' and locating a 'truth' to inform how they 'read the world' (Freire, 2004,

p. 29). However, I also observed Boler's (2004) three categories amongst my student cohort, specifically with many students claiming a lack of interest in politics; not understanding existing and competing political worldviews; or do not see how politics is relevant for their lives or how language is employed for political purposes. Further, Boler (2004, p. 117) questions: How can educators and students make productive use out of this suffering and discomfort? Recognizing the discomfort has had a profound impact on my teaching and is woven throughout the narrative explored in this chapter. Significantly, the outcomes of my critical inquiry speak to Boler's (2004) 'three' categories of students as survey data collected at the end of the course demonstrates a willingness to engage in spite of the initial 'lack of interest' (or numbness) in politics they brought with them to the course; as well as those who continue to contest its relevance or socially critical perspectives (Faulkner & Crowhurst 2014).

The action research process we have adopted involves not just identifying a teaching challenge and formulating a research question, but also naming our hopeful ideas, positive outcomes of our interventions. I have three hopeful ideas:

1. The enabling approaches of scaffolding, setting challenging tasks, supporting democratic teaching and learning spaces and connecting with lifeworlds would increase students engagement with and understanding of 'politics' and provide the students with greater understanding of the way that language is utilised to promote a world view (such as progressive/conservative) in the media.

2. Students experience increased confidence in their future engagement with texts as they develop awareness of dominant forces in society and helps students to recognise, critique and create change and to give power over the meaning-making process.

3. Paying attention to the affective domain, students could move past discomfort, disconnection and political apathy and engage with political categories and themes in the course to develop an insight to how people and issues are positioned by these categories.

The following section details how I conducted my experiment in increasing confidence and engagement with 'politics' in my critical literacy course through an action research model.

My intervention: Increasing connection through lifeworlds & scaffolding of challenging tasks

The action research model we adopted at UniSA College features three key important elements. The first element is found in most action research models, that of the 'operational'. This is the steps or process that is often reflected in a spiral: plan, act, observe, reflect or describe, inform, confront, reconstruct (Hattam 2010). In addition to the 'operational', our approach happened in collaboration (Hattam 2010) with one another, as we met at various points to share our teaching challenges and discuss the importance of having a shared understanding of enabling pedagogy. These sessions had a deep and profound impact on the teaching team in terms of building a respectful and engaged culture of critical inquiry but also on the culture of our school more broadly. The sessions triggered and pushed many of us out of our comfort zones as we had to face our own deficit thinking about the students and sometimes ourselves. For some of us, it was

the first time we felt brave enough to own up to our deficit thinking, providing a space to consider how we address and overcome such historically entrenched paradigms in higher education pedagogy. The third element of our action research model entails 'critical reflection' (Hattam 2010). Through our application of enabling pedagogies (that are underpinned by critical pedagogy) and attempts to unsettle assumptions and deficit thinking that are harmful for our diverse cohorts at UniSA College, we collectively explore: how can our teaching be changed to serve the most disadvantaged students? While there has been intense focus on addressing access to higher education in Australia (Commonwealth of Australia 2008; Muldoon 2011) there are concerns about what experience students have once they get there because "higher education pedagogies might also be complicit in the reproduction of inequalities even after entry to [university] has been achieved" (Burke et al. 2017, p. 2). Although embedded within the Higher Education (HE) institutions, the 'enabling' space is distinct to traditional HE due to the higher representation of students from recognised equity groups (Bennett et al., 2016; Crawford, 2015; Stokes, 2014). With approximately 70% of our student cohort belonging to an equity group category, adopting this frame as part of our model of action research has been instrumental to the positive outcomes of the interventions.

Over the last three years, I have implemented changes to the course content and curriculum through the adoption of the enabling pedagogical strategies described as 'scaffolding'; 'engaging with students lifeworlds', 'setting challenging tasks' and 'democratic & transformative approaches'. As a disruptor or intervention of education disadvantage in accessing higher education in Australia, enabling education can adopt and enact principles of high expectation curricula through strategies of scaffolding students learning as well as connecting with students lifeworlds by drawing on 'funds of knowledge' (Moll et al 1992). Contesting deficit views of less advantaged learners, the funds of knowledge approach involves gathering and understanding the knowledge that students have and support school learning through critical home-classroom connections (Dudley-Marling & Dudley-Marling 2015 p. 47). Funds of knowledge approaches also run counter to tracking or gatekeeping as to 'build curriculum work around knowledge that carries lifeworld use values counters the exchange-values (or capitalizing) logic of school sorting and selecting (Zipin, Sellars & Hattam 2012, p. 181).

A critical sensibility towards pedagogy is important in a world where there is streaming and tracking of young people during the middle years of secondary schooling (Mehan 2012). This practice of segmenting the student market is based on perceived capability (Burke 2015) to transition into university study and is intricately tied to their socio-economic status. Disengagement from secondary school and lower completion or 'success' rates in Australia are experienced at a higher rate for students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds (Smyth & Hattam 2004). Marling & Michaels (2012) offer an explanation, that 'through the lens of deficit thinking that dominates many current versions of educational reform, the problem resides in the language and culture of students and their families' (p. 3) and that it is 'deficit thinking (that) holds poor children and their families responsible for educational and vocational failures, a classic form of blaming the victim (Marling & Michaels, 2012, p. 6). Secondary students perceived as less capable are targeted with low-challenge curriculum, creating a barrier for further study beyond high school as they are pushed onto the vocational education track or into Flexible Learning

Programs (FLO) (Bills & Howard 2017). These practices assume that students are incapable of agency or growth as learners and incapable of further educational attainment or success.

Through strategic scaffolding of curriculum and assessment, high intellectual challenge is possible. Learners from low-socioeconomic backgrounds historically suffer from 'streaming' or 'tracking', as Mehan suggests: 'The distribution of students to high-, middle-, and low-ability groups or academic and voc-ed tracks seems to be related to ethnicity and socio-economic status (Mehan 2012, p 17). Once streamed into a low-ability class, capabilities are misrecognized (Burke et al. 2017) and contribute to lower completion and success rates of less advantaged young people in secondary school. In *Critical literacy*, the assessment is scaffolded and the students begin the course by analyzing media texts to first develop criticality, leading to conducting a critical review of a peer reviewed journal article. *Critical Literacy* aims to develop criticality across the genres so students learn that some are more credible sources of information than others. The high expectations are set at the beginning of the course as the students are supported through the scaffolding process of critically analysing a text that is familiar to the academic genre (not as familiar). This approach aligns with Luke's (2012 p. viii) argument:

> In sociocultural terms, this entails upping the ante of intellectual demand, teaching in advance of development, and generating substantive engagement with curriculum knowledge and technical discourses as ways of reading and remaking the social and scientific lifeworlds around us.

The scaffolding from media to academic texts means the students are encouraged to view 'literacies as sets (sic) of practice, the focus shifts towards the ways in which students learn to participate and make meaning within an academic context' (Henderson and Hirst 2007, p. 26). Setting 'challenging tasks' earlier on as part of the curriculum produced greater confidence with and higher grades overall for the assessment. A key strategy of my action research project was implementing a more scaffolded approach to introducing different political worldviews with the inclusion of popular culture and examples that spoke to their lifeworlds across a number of weeks. I will first discuss the scaffolding process and then outline the connections I made to the students lifeworlds specifically to engage them in politics and language.

Students begin the course with an introduction to critical thinking as defined as 'setting out actively to understand what is really going on using reasoning, evaluating evidence and thinking carefully about the process of thinking itself' (Chatfield 2019). Students are introduced to concepts such as objectivity, skepticism, bias and are encouraged to think about who or what has influenced their values and opinions on a range of current social issues. In the first week, we also look at the 'fake news' phenomena, as it has increasingly undermined our ability to believe sources of information through the spread of disinformation.

Early in the course we also build the students understanding of the importance of building their media literacy. Through the introduction of semiotic theory, we explore how our constant engagement with multiple forms of media influences how we make sense of the world around us. I also highlight for them that part of being media literate is understanding not just how the algorithms work in our social media platforms to show us content that will confirm our biases, but that we also need to ask: who owns the media? If there is a lack of diversity of media ownership,

what does this mean for democracy in Australia? Can we identify a specific world-view being represented by the different media companies in their content? To highlight that different media platforms may present stories with a specific stance that connects with a left or right political perspective, the students are given two articles on a contemporary social issue that may impact many of our students – increasing social welfare payments. One presents a progressive stance and one presents a conservative stance, and the students are encouraged to consider these questions:

Compare the 'evidence' included to support the discussion in both articles? Whose voices are included?

What is the stance adopted by the News Corp article on the issue? What is the stance adopted by SBS News? Does this implicate the broader values of the newsgroup?

What language techniques are adopted to inspire an emotional response in either article?

Students identify the lack of diverse 'voices' in the NewsCorp article, and the loaded, negative language that is used to describe young people who receive welfare payments. Comparatively with the SBS article that includes multiple and competing voices and focuses on condemning government actions and not the young people. As the first analysis, this activity supports the scaffolding of the students awareness of political biases across media platforms and the important critical literacy questions to start asking when engaging with media texts: Whose viewpoint is expressed? What does the author want us to think? Whose voices are missing? How might alternative perspectives be represented? How would that contribute to your understanding the text from a critical stance? What action might you take on the basis of what you learned?

In week 3, the students are specifically introduced to critical literacy with a focus on understanding that language is not neutral. Collectively we discuss how the meanings of 'family' have changed and differ according to context and over time. I ask, why does it matter how 'family' is defined by society, different institutions (such as religion and politics) or the media. This generates a lot of discussion in the learning space as meanings of family have strong political, social and cultural implications, that are quickly highlighted by students who may come from sole-parent families, blended families, are members of the LGBTIQ+ community or from a country where families take a different approach to managing intergenerational relationships. In addition to this activity, students are given another text analysis task. This time they are given two media texts on the topic of Aboriginal deaths in custody, as it connects with the global Black Lives Matter movement (another contemporary social issue). This time their task is to answer the critical literacy questions as featured above, but to also pay attention to the different methods of the authors to include 'facts' (through statistics, reports, policies) and emotive language. We discuss which article more successfully persuades the reader to adopt the authors stance, and to inspire action.

Another key intervention involved re-designing the curriculum so students are encouraged to select their own topic for assessment two that enhances the 'democratic' element (Shor 1992) in the course. The 'democratic' element highlights the political importance of 'talking' that occurs in the teaching space, as "the rules for talking are a key mechanism for empowering or disempowering students" (Shor, 1992, p.21). Transformative and empowering education happens through 'dialogic' approaches (Shor & Freire 1987). In contrast to the traditional

'banking-style' of HE, a dialogic approach to teaching sets out to 'not talk knowledge at students but talk with them' (Shor 1992, p. 85).

In the first few weeks of the course, students are asked to pick a topic they are passionate about and to find a media text on the topic (some examples of popular topics were domestic violence, mental health, climate change). This also provide opportunities to tap into their 'lifeworlds', as they explored a topic that connected with them personally. Building on the scaffolding that has already occurred in weeks 1-3, in week 4 we map out how these issues they are interested in could be influenced by whether government chooses to legislate or support through policy or provide adequate resources. This was an significant part of the learning process, as I began to see a shift in the discussion from expressing views such as 'I think politics is boring', or 'what does it have to do with me', to a realization that 'politics is everywhere' (Mooney 2015) and the topics they have selected and are discussed in the media texts are often highly contested in political spaces. Most importantly, the students could begin to identify that language was being used to persuade the reader to adopt a particular stance that linked to a progressive or conservative worldview. The course is sensitive to the binary thinking that puts us into 'two camps' and I provide other examples and literature to show that we all need to push back against binary thinking, but through the course the students learn that the mainstream media and politicians encourage us to think in binary terms and we should 'pick a side'.

Another intervention that highlights my pedagogical strategy to connect with the students lifeworlds was through conducting a case study of important issues facing students in week 7 of the course. I searched for news headlines on the topic of graduate employment prospects, costs of education and surviving while studying. I asked 'how are these issues framed or problematised in the media, analyzing the worldview represented in the framing'. The headlines we deconstructed in the lecture were:

1. New data reveals which universities have the worst employment outcomes (News.com, August 26th 2017).
2. Five myths about Australian university graduate outcomes (The Conversation, 24th November 2017).
3. Cost of Australia university degrees set to soar by up to $15k (9 Finance, 5th April 2018).
4. One in seven uni students often forced to go without food: new study (Sydney Morning Herald, 13th August 2018).
5. Was your university degree worth the debt? High-paying jobs aren't a sure thing, experts say (ABC News, 11th April 2018.

After showing the students the different headlines from a cross section of articles from media outlets positioned along the political spectrum, I problem pose 'What possible ideological position exists for this topic? I highlight that the stance presented across these sources is of concern for the students (as victims) of an employment market that is insecure, therefore links can be made to left/progressive side of politics for a number of reasons (Left/progressive side advocates for increased opportunity and access to higher education, no matter where you sit on the social class ladder; Left/progressive side is concerned with how resources/wealth are being distributed; Left/progressive side supports government investment in education, and reduce fees so that social classes are not reproduced).

However, another way of looking at this story is that there is a scare campaign or 'panic' about employability on completing a degree. Who would be most unsettled by this news that the financial investment in education may not pay-off? People who are already marginalized and may not want to take the risk. Hence, the ideological framing of these stories could form part of a neo-liberal agenda by the right side of politics that aims to minimize public spending on education and promotes a meritocratic approach based on 'hard work' and not widening access to higher education (Giroux 2014). Interestingly, it is the left/progressive media outlet '*The Conversation'* that published the article on the '*myths about university outcomes'* that constructs a much more positive account of employment prospects.

In addition to deconstructing a life world issue, through examples such as 'Disney' (gender roles), 'Kath and Kim' (social class) or the 'Black Klanssman' (anti-racism), in my lectures I was able to deconstruct and highlight gender, class and race ideologies, encouraging the students to 'see how the worlds of texts work to construct their worlds, their cultures, and their identities in powerful, often overly ideological ways' (Luke 2000, p. 453). 2000, p. 453). In week 8 of the course, the students are introduced to Stanley Cohen's moral panic theory and the identity cluster 'folk devils' (such as single mothers on welfare, violent working-class young men, refugees and illegal immigrants). This scaffolds from the popular culture examples that highlight positioning of specific identities by the media. The students are set a text analysis in the tutorial where they detect how Aboriginal ex-footballer, Adam Goodes is being positioned by right-wing media personality Andrew Bolt and Aboriginal Sports Commentator, Charlie King in a panel discussion on ABC news following the 'booing' incidents of Adam Goodes when he spoke out against racism in football. Following this topic, the students then submit their second assignment, the guided critical review of a media text.

My data collection phase of the project involved the distribution of a hand-written survey to 200+ in the final week of the course that featured the following questions:

1. How confident are you to identify the political worldview that is being represented in what you read in the media?
2. How confident are you in detecting the way specific groups and people are represented in the media?
3. Do you feel confident to assess whether you should believe something as the 'truth', whether in the media or academia?

Students provided length and generous responses to survey, giving me a valuable and rich insight of the impacts of my intervention. 'Hopeful idea' number one was brought to fruition, as the student feedback demonstrated an increased understanding of 'politics' and the way that language is utilised to promote a world view (such as progressive/conservative) in the media. In response to question 3 of the survey: *How confident do you feel about identifying the political worldview that is being represented in what you read in the media*?, many students offered positive accounts of how the course has transformed their understanding of the link between politics and the media. Such as this response '*Before starting this course, I had very little understanding of politics, despite many people attempting to explain the concept to me in the past. I certainly had no idea political bias exists in the media. I'm now not only aware it exists, but I am able to identify it*' (Student feedback, Survey 2019).

Another student reflects on their increased confidence: *'Before this course I stayed in a bubble and had no ideas about politics. After doing this course I have found myself watching the news and to try and follow what is happening…I feel more confident about understanding what I watch, read and listen to*' (Student feedback, Survey 2019). This suggests the student has developed the knowledge and awareness of how the media manipulates and persuades its audience to adopt specific viewpoints, that link to the representation of specific political interests of particular groups of people.

This skepticism is echoed in this student comment 'I *am definitely better at recognizing and identifying worldviews and now have a more skeptical approach to consuming media as well as a bigger interest in politics*' (Student feedback, Survey 2019). This reflection demonstrates a shift from apathy or boredom with 'politics' to an increased interest and awareness of how the political machinery impacts their life personally.

Other students reflected on how the course assisted their understanding of politics more broadly; '*I finally understand what political parties stand for and what they try and do. Do I like politics….NO! I think most of them are dumb. However, the course has helped me understand what the media and politics is trying to do* (Student feedback, Survey 2019). This is further evidence of a shift that occurred for this student from a place of misunderstanding about politics (*I finally understand*) to grasping the significance of the (dys)function of the media in conveying biased political viewpoints.

Student artefacts – demonstration of identification of political worldviews or ideologies

In addition to the student feedback reflecting the shift in thinking, I collected student assignments as artefacts of the project. hese excerpts from students critical review of a media text demonstrate a sophisticated connection to political worldviews or ideologies. Prior to the action research project, students were not submitting work with this level of sophistication and application of the political discourse. This speaks to 'hopeful' idea number two regarding the students increased confidence in their engagement with texts as they develop awareness of dominant forces in society and helps students to recognise, critique and create change and to give power over the meaning-making process.

Student analysis #1 not only identified the specific stance of the author according to where it would align on a political spectrum from left to right and gave a description of the values aligned with the left/right, but also identified the political bias that is increasingly evident across NewsCorp news stories. In week 2 of the course, I embedded a greater focus on the monopoly and concentration of media ownership in Australia with an emphasis on the emergence of a right and conservative political bias being communicated by NewsCorp (ref).

1. Students analysis of article on death of George Floyd in police custody in the US

As News Corp Australia owns news.com.au it could be assumed the article is ***right-winged****. However, the text is condemning the officers and the stance of the writer tells the audience their belief is the officers should be charged, and police brutality is evident. So, while those with right-wing ideologies believe criminals choose to be criminals and are for upholding order and survival of the fittest; the* ***left-***

wing *believes criminals are social and economic victims and are for champions of downtrodden and helping those who cannot help themselves. Therefore, showing it is a left-winged perspective and the* ***writer has a progressive world-view stance, believing in freedom from power, abuse and inequality*** *(Student #1).*

Student analysis #2 illuminates the diversity of the student topics that often correlate with the destination undergraduate degree they are seeking to transition into on completion of the enabling program. Student #2 discussed in the learning space their interest in marine biology and the political implications were difficult for the student to identify at first. As is evident from their analysis, the student overcame these difficulties and produced a perceptive analysis of the political worldview that informed the stance of the author.

2. Student analysis of article on conservation of sharks in South Africa

The argument presented in the text condemns the actions of fisheries, governments and consumers for the decline in the great white shark population. As per cage diver operator Mr Fallows statement, "small sharks comprise up to 60% of the diet of great white sharks". Furthermore, the highlight of this statement shows that the writer believes a decline in this population, would directly affects the population of great white sharks. ***Additionally, this stance is informed by a progressive viewpoint****, as it does not consider the fisheries financial gains and is more adapt to conserving this shark species instead. The Australian government is also targeted, as shark meat exported imported "enter our fish and chip market as flake". The author highlights this issue as it becomes harder for consumers to differentiate what they are eating.* ***This belief is a progressive view****, as the author is striving for change to assimilate with the current situation. The progressive ideologies in the beliefs of the author are shared with all of their stances, as they strive for reform and changing of current situations for a better future (Student #2).*

The analysis of Student #3 highlights the progressive stance of the author in the media text about the school policy on bathroom usage for transgender students. Student #3 identifies the specific language choices of the author that covey this stance, connecting to gender ideologies and the contestation over rights of transgender young people at school. This analysis shows an understanding of the complexity of identity politics as they are constituted as aligning with the left or right side of the political spectrum.

3. Student analysis of article on incident of discrimination against a transgender student in the US

This text serves to commend the victim on winning the lawsuit against the school. A specific quote is used saying "he was forced to use … the girl's bathroom" which reinforces the idea of the struggles of transgender people. Additionally, there is reiteration on the victim having "done something wrong" for choices made, which reinforces the author's progressive stance, along with the inclusion of the "the time for trans rights is now" quote. Furthermore, the article serves to condemn the high school as the perpetrator of the lawsuit, as well as the school board. An excerpt from the trial in which the school board held beliefs in which boys may claim to be "'gender fluid' in order to be voyeurs", shows this. ***Regarding these statements, the author's worldview is progressive or politically left****. The author's perspective is in complete support for the victim, shown by taking many excerpts from their side as opposed to the school district (Student #4).*

Apathy, boredom or misunderstood – what did I learn about my students?

The data collection demonstrated students acknowledged that they may not complete the course with an increased interest with politics or political bias, but that their eyes have been opened to this process in the media and they are aware of the significance of political bias '*My interest in politics has not changed. I still don't have a view on it but now when I see the media exposing it, I do look up key words on the topic to gain a better understanding about what the media was wanting to expose*' (Student feedback, Survey 2019); *'I never really had a thought when it came to politics, however with media I have learnt not to also rely on what is being shown without looking it up with evidence*' (Student feedback, Survey 2019). Hess and Gatti (2010, p. 22) propose that 'teaching controversial issues through discussion strengthens democracy because of the causal relationship between discussion and the cultivation of political tolerance', that is vital to democracies like Australia.

Students reflect on completion of the course of how they have come to identify the media as a key proponent of racism, sexism, Islamophobia and homophobia. Giving the students opportunities to analyse and critique the power structures (media, government, education, church) that they interact with on a daily basis empowers them as they realise they can resist and challenge the dominant messages communicated within and by these structures. The responses to question 2 of the survey about the course *increasing confidence in identifying the way specific groups and people are represented in the media*, indicate this awareness of marginalization as one student responded '*I guess the lesson of asking 'whose voices are being heard/ignored is important to remember'* (Student feedback, Survey 2019). Another student reflected *'I was unaware of how much minorities were not represented in the media. I previously never thought much about the voices that were excluded*' (Student feedback, Survey 2019). The scaffolding of concepts and application to different texts each week provided the tools for students to apply in their everyday 'reading of the world' (Freire 2004) as this student shared: '*Seeing biased articles and news had always upset me, but being able to identify methods of bias and manipulation and poor research makes it easier for me to understand*' (Student feedback, Survey 2019).

Choosing themes that connect strongly with their lifeworlds means the students develop an enhanced awareness of the relevance of understanding political ideologies. This inspires students to challenge what is being presented as the 'truth' in the media across a whole range of issues. In Freire's terms, through the course students can become 'masters of their own thinking' (1974, p. 124), as their consciousness has been raised and they are empowered to create their own 'truth' claims, or narrative, about the world and their place in the world. As one student reflected: '*I think coming out of this course I will be more aware of how I might be being manipulated'* (Student feedback, Survey 2019). Another student reflected: '*Before this course I had no interest in politics, now I find I have gained a new respect for it*' (Student feedback, Survey 2019). I have learnt that students might struggle and resist, but our role is to provide them with the 'critical hope' and a sense of possibility as we rebuild the world around us together through practicing compassion and being aware this is difficult in an 'increasingly polarized society' (Shor 2018, p. 98).

Similar to Boler (2004), the 'discomfort' experienced in the classroom has 'forced me to reevaluate the costs and benefits of my own emotional investment in students willingness to change' (2004, p. 123). This re-evaluation is timely as the emotional investment coalesces with the documented emotional labour demands in enabling education due to the diverse and vulnerable student cohort (Crawford, Olds, Lisciandro, Jaceglav, Westacott & Osenieks 2018). I am more attuned to my emotional reactions in the teaching space, as I understand the importance to 'pause' and manage my own emotions (Cutri & Whiting 2015).

The turn to affect (Ahmed 2004) in my critical inquiry of my teaching has also led me to question how I can avoid committing 'ethical violence' (Zembylas 2015) on my students as I encourage them to 'unpack their cherished world views and comfort zones' (Zembylas 2015, p. 166) while also palpably aware of the necessity to create a 'safe space' for these discussions (Dutta, Schroll, Engelsen, Prickett, Hajjar & Green 2016). Boler suggests having compassion for the students who are struggling with the task of critical thinking and have their 'world-view shattered', and offer 'resources to help them replace the lost sense of self' (2004, p. 127). Janks (2014) also describes the importance of focusing not just on 'deconstruction', but also on 'reconstruction' that gives the students agency and a possibility of making a positive difference. This 'reconstruction' is an opportunity to invite the students to 'construct productive and agentic narratives as critical producers of knowledge, as well as critical consumers' (Cho & Johnson 2020, p. 2). The strategy of inviting the students to select a topic they strongly connect with led to increased engagement and heightened sense of the relevance of politics in their lives. I also observed that often students discomfort dissipated or eased by week four or five of the course as they focused on critically analysing their own article, giving them agency over their learning and avoiding a scenario where I 'talk knowledge (Shor 1992, p. 85) at them. Also by demonstrating an interest in their lifeworlds through the case study of news articles on graduate outcomes may also help alleviate the discomfort and build 'trust' and 'goodwill' between the students and myself as I demonstrate by this careful topic selection, I care about their education and employment opportunities.

Conclusion

When done collectively with a team, the action research process provides a shared language/theory and gives educators the space to overcome and address teaching challenges, with the focus on 'hopeful ideas', we can make positive contributions to our students lives through our teaching as well as learn from them how to develop our teaching practice. Enabling pedagogy enacted in a critical literacy course presents opportunities of transformation not just for students, but for educators as well. To borrow from hooks (1994, p. 21), 'any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place that teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That transformation cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks'. Participating in a collective action research project gave me the confidence to face my vulnerability and overcome teaching challenges that has contributed to increased student engagement, outstanding student outcomes of high challenge curricula and increased hope for the students: *I have doubted myself for most of my life but I am finally starting to realise that I am capable, I just have to believe in myself a bit more* (student email communication, 2020). As the student cohort in Bachelor level study becomes increasingly diverse, adopting 'critical'

pedagogical approaches in undergraduate teaching not only supports a social justice agenda for widening participation, but also improves overall student engagement, retention and satisfaction with teaching.

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